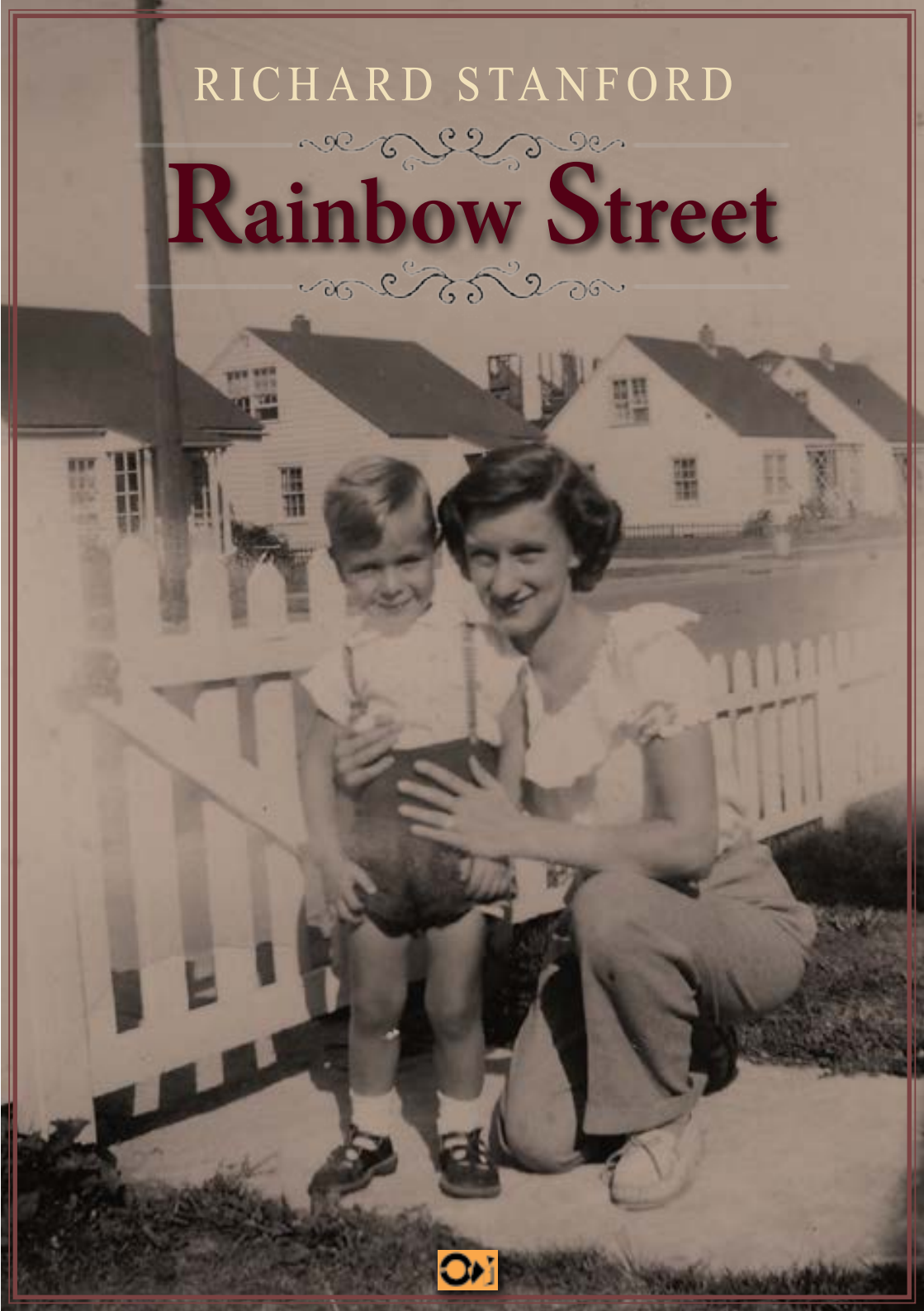
RICHARD STANFORD

Rainbow Street



Richard Stanford

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There are episodes in most men's lives in which
their highest qualities can only cast a deferring shadow
over the objects that fill their inward vision.
- George Eliot.

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The boy arrived on our street one day without a name and without a past. It was the spring of 1950, a hot humid day in the east-end of Montréal where the aromas of pure coke, tanning dye and railway dust welcomed the morning. I lived with my parents on St. Clement Street, two houses up from the train tracks. We kept time to the passenger trains and lost sleep to the rumble of freight trains. But like anything else you get used to it, that and the aromas. My father never did get used to it. On this day I was in our backyard with a Brownie Instamatic camera and I had plenty of territory to find subjects to shot. Our backyard was large, populated by a couple of apple trees, several shrubs and beds of roses - my mother's handiwork. The roses became the first of my images because birds would not sit still. Neither could my mother.

"Where are you?" Nora shouted from the back door, a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

I was on the ground framing in the viewfinder what I thought to be a perfect shot. "What!"

"Don't bark at me, young man. Now come, and bring the camera," and she set off in a puff of smoke along the walkway to the street.

She didn't have to tell me to bring the camera. Since Nora had given it to me for my thirteenth birthday a week ago it has never left my side. I took it to bed with me thinking I might be able to photograph one of my dreams. I had many to choose from. I caught up to my mother. "What's up?"

"The Schlott's have a child, a little boy apparently." The few times I had seen Mrs. Schlott she never seemed pregnant. "That's not the only way to get a kid. They got it at some agency," she said.

"Agency? You mean a kennel?"

"No, silly. An adoption agency."

It made no sense. You pick up a kid at an agency and bring it home like a bag of groceries? I didn't know much about sex in those days and but I knew that kids didn't come from agencies.

I kept up to my mother's brisk pace along the street towards the Schlott's house. My mother didn't really walk; she marched. Unlike other women who cast their eyes down, Nora held her head upright, scanning her world with her sharp green eyes. As usual earrings dangled from under her short blonde hair. Her eyes regarded the clapboard bungalows that lined both sides of the street. They were known as Veterans Homes, built for the soldiers returning from the war. The houses were inexpensive and interest-free. They were simple square structures with a small front patio and a modest backyard. Each was painted a different colour. This was was decided late one night during a whiskey-fueled house party celebrating the first anniversary of the end of the war. The veterans, sick of six years of banality and death, wanted to make a statement of uniqueness, of being different just for the hell of it. I was there that night and watched as the vets, my father included, shook on it. I had seen enough to know the next morning's hangover would blot out that collective vow. It didn't. Within a month the two blocks of Veterans Homes

were awash in colour. The Balfours and the Tremblays painted theirs red; green was popular with four homes; the Poirier's went orange; purple for the Prowses' (mother Gina claiming she was royalty); a couple of yellows; and blue for us. "It's like living in a box of Smarties," Nora said. A reporter and photographer with La Presse newspaper came by one day to do a story on the street and named it "rue Arc-en-ciel". Translated, we became Rainbow Street and a tourist attraction. For month afterwards people drove to our street, hundreds of them, taking pictures, gawking. When people talk about putting their city on the map, we were already on it.

"I don't know if this was such a great idea," said Sonny Balfour. "We should start charging a toll."

Rainbow Street was also the street of war stories. On summer evenings the men would gather impromptu at one of the houses and tell stories into the night. A good story always ended with a hearty laugh. It was the humour of the macabre – the stories seldom involved killing but death was always close by. After the laughter came silence.

We arrived at the Schlott's house. It was lime-green. Mrs. Schlott, a heavy-set woman of about thirty, came out the front door followed by the boy. I thought that she would carry him but there he was three years old walking on his own, fully formed. So this is how adoption works: skip the diapers and the sleepless nights, patiently wait three years and get one made-to-order kid ready for the world, no fuss. How wrong I was.

Mrs. Schlott led the boy to the front gate and left him there. She looked puzzled by the whole thing as if she had brought home a moose and didn't know what to feed it. Her face was stern and while she feigned a smile there was a frown crease carved deep in her forehead. I'm convinced that had Nora offered take him off her hands Mrs. Schlott would have gladly consented.

"So what's his name?" asked Nora.

Mrs. Schlott sighed deeply. "We're thinking about it."

"But the agency must have one for him."

"We want him to have a new start. The past is the past."

That was one of the oddest things I had ever heard. The past is the what? "He'll know," I said. I bent down coming face to face with him. "Do you remember your name, young man?"

He shook his head. His dark brown eyes stared back at me. What has he seen?

A woman came out the front door and was introduced to us as Mrs. Schlott's sister Anna. She could not have been more different from her sibling: Young, vivacious and someone happy to be with the boy, his godmother. She bent down and wrapped her arms around the boy.

"Take it away, camera-boy," Nora said, lighting another cigarette, puffing smoke to the skyward. "If you wait any longer he'll be a teenager."

I looked to Mrs. Schlott and gestured to her to get into the shot. "Oh, no," she said. "I don't like my picture being taken."

The first photograph to be taken of the boy and his mother wanted no part of it. I framed the two of them and snapped the shutter. The boy approached me and touched the camera. He turned it over, inspecting it then looked through the viewfinder. He handed the camera back to me, nodded and went back into the house. He said not a word.

The next day that I saw the Anna carry four suitcases from the Schlott's house to a waiting taxi cab. The driver loaded the cases into the trunk. She hopped into the back seat and as they drove past me I saw her pull the bobby-

pins from her hair, her long blonde mane unfurling with the breeze through the window. She glanced at me without a smile.

It was a week before I had the film roll processed and printed. The photo of the boy and his aunt was terrible: there were light leaks along the edges and I framed in such a way that the coke towers in the background were sprouting from the top of Anna's head. My future clearly did not include being a portrait photographer. I did feel a certain pride that my camera had taken the very first picture of the boy. I took the print to the Schlott's house and left it in their mailbox. The Schlott's said nothing to me and I wouldn't see the boy for another three years which was good because my own family was slowly falling apart.

My father Henry came back from the war in 1945 a broken man. At first it wasn't obvious. He was a quiet, kind-looking man with a boyish face that never seemed to change. Never stern, never prone to anger, he was reflective and perfectly content reading a book or playing backgammon after dinner. Because of his military service - and the Victoria Cross he had been awarded for bravery - we moved from a small, damp apartment in Rosemount to our new home on Rainbow Street. Simpson's department store re-hired him to his old job as a buyer. On the surface it all seemed that re-entry into civilian life was going well and I finally had the chance to know my father for the first time, or so I thought.

It started with the trains. Henry would grip the armrests of his chair when the freight trains rumbled through. People say the ground shakes when trains rumble by. I think everything shakes. It did in our house: the walls, the photographs, the couch, my mother, even me. So I really didn't notice at first that my father trembled. My mother did because when the train left all the shaking stopped but my father didn't. He became an insomniac. I often

found him in the mornings staring out the living room windows at nothing. And there was his walking, relentless miles of it. In the middle of the night I would hear his footsteps coming down the hallway, going out the front door and not returning until morning. Nora was expecting the booze to kick in any day but it didn't. He never was a drinker and so he never used it as an excuse for his erratic behaviour. In those days there was no word for what my father and other vets were going through. The best they could come up with was 'shell-shock' or 'battle fatigue'. Regardless of what it was called, my father suffered.

And so did my mother. I often heard her pacing in the bedroom on those nights. I heard her soft sobs. I had to go in. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, her head buried in her hands. She looked up at me, her eyes wet with tears. I sat beside her, put my arm around her.

"I'm so sorry, son. I'm sorry we can't be a normal family."

"I don't think such a thing exists."

"You're far too cynical for your age."

"Well, this has aged me."

"I suppose it has." She stood up and began to pace the room. I suppose movement was therapy. "Henry is not the same man I married. He's not the same father, either."

"I don't care about that stuff, Mom. I don't want to go fishing with my father, or baseball games. I want him to get better."

"I do, too, son. I do, too. All we can do is…what do they say in England? Keep the home fires burning? That's all we can do."

The silent weeks rolled by until one day Nora saw that Henry's pay cheque had not been deposited into their joint account. When Nora called his office

they told her that Henry had not been to work in six weeks, that one day he left for lunch and never came back. He was fired. Making it look like he was still employed and all was well he used his severance pay to make regular deposits. The severance money had now run out.

One afternoon in the spring of that year I came home from school to find my father sitting at the kitchen table, a suitcase by his side. Nora sat across from him looking away.

Henry's dark eyes gazed up at me. "I've spoken with your mother. She'll explain everything to you. I can't stay here. I love you, son. I'm sorry." He picked up his suitcase, put on his fedora and turned to leave. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Good luck," and continued to the front door.

I don't know what gripped me in that moment. Maybe fear, maybe shame but mostly it was anger. "That's it! That's the best you can do! Good luck?"

"Sit down," Nora said sharply.

Henry glanced at me, said nothing and left.

"What? He's dead to you?" I shouted.

"Get a grip on yourself."

"Can't we help him?"

"Believe me I've tried. Ever since he's been back I've supported him, held him as cried like a baby. I was scared to death thinking he might do something stupid. A policeman brought him back one night. They thought it suspicious for him to be walking alone at four in the morning. They thought he might be a burglar. I don't know what's in his head, son, but whatever it's beyond me. Oh, and the Victoria Cross? He hocked it for fifty bucks."

She took five ten dollar bills from her purse and gave one of them to me.

"The first thing we need is food. Go down to Hochelaga Market. I've got calls to make."

"That's it! My father walks out the door and that's the end of it?"

Nora stood up. There were lines of worry on her face. "Listen. You're not the first kid in the world who doesn't have a father and you won't be the last. We both have work to do and we're not going to get it done if we wallow in this. To start, you're going to study and you're going to university and you're going to study everything. When you're finished with that you're going to study the next thing." She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and held me for a few moments. She did what she always has done to me, leaning back and patting my chest. "So let's get it done. Oh, and get some cheese at Pirandello's."

I walked the train tracks to the Hochelaga Farmers Market. What are you supposed to feel when life comes along and slaps you in the face? I recalled a memory I had of Henry from a summer night in '47 when he was animated for the first times in months. The vets on Rainbow Street had gathered around in Sonny Balfour's backyard. It was a story night, cigarette tips glowing yellow in the dark, and Henry told his one story – only once:

"So we're moving up the boot of Italy. Bloody hell of a place. Dust and sand."

"What regiment?" asked one of the vets.

"22nd Royal Montréal, engineering corps. We fixed up shattered equipment, got them operational, tanks, cannons. We built bridges. We got a couple of days of R&R, so we fell back to the banks of Moro River. We circled the trucks and jeeps, tied ropes between them and hung our laundry out to dry. We we're dirty as hell and stank worse. We all ran down to the river. Fresh. Clear. Water. We were all so light-hearted, just kids again, splashing

one another, shouting. The poplar trees shivered in the sunset breeze. Then we heard it. A Stuka flying low, the sound widening and spreading out all at once. He strafed the trunks then the river. We grabbed our guns, headed up the slope, stark naked. What a sight we must have been. Bastard turned for one more pass and strafed us again. We opened up on him with our rifles and a machine gun and nailed him in the gas tank at the wing. He blew up in the sky. Thing was, the bastard shot our clothes to hell, holes in everything, including my underwear. For six months I was walking around in holy jockeys!"

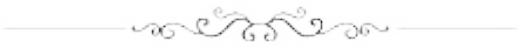
There were chuckles all around. Then they stopped. They knew the story wasn't over.

Henry continued, staring at the ground. "We realized there were two guys missing. We went back to the river and there they were, floating slowly in the current, in a circle of their own blood."

The men withdrew into themselves as if praying in a church. They were home and safe, the war long over, but memories were never far away. There is a mystic sorrow about soldiers that comes from facing the possibility of death every day. I think coal miners have it, too. As I walked through the market I tried to comprehend what that event meant to my father but I had no words for it.

By the next day Nora had found a job as a secretary at Degas-Moore Publishers in downtown Montréal. She bought a typewriter and set up a study in the spare room. Before long she was reading manuscripts and typing critiques. She renewed her license and started driving our Ford Fairlane that had been on blocks in the driveway. That was my Nora taking control, much like she did when Henry went overseas. In those days there were jobs aplenty for women who wanted to support the war effort. She got a job at a garment

manufacturer in Point St. Charles making army uniforms. The depression years had given her the skills to make ends meet and sometimes those ends were truly cloth threads. She got a salary at the plant but it wasn't much and there was food rationing. Somehow Nora held it together and I never starved nor lacked a book to read.



A week before Labour Day in 1953 Mr. and Mrs. Schlott knocked on our front door. Nora was typing a book review in her study so I was delegated to see what was up. Mr. Schlott was a policeman and he was still in uniform with a gun in his holster. Oh no, I thought, what have I done?

Mr. Schlott chuckled. "Don't worry, buddy, I'm off duty."

That was unusual. We never saw much of Mr. Schlott. Shift work, mostly nights was his life so he was seldom around. He was a big man, with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, thick neck and a head like a boxer. He was friendly enough but it took effort.

"We were wondering if you could walk Niki to school next week," said Mrs.Schlott. "It's his first day. His school is right across the street from yours."

"Niki? Who's Niki" I asked.

"Our son Nicholas. You took a picture of him three years ago."

I'd forgotten all about him and the photograph. But Niki? What kind of a name was that?

"I'm on the night shift next week so I'll be asleep in the mornings. If it's all the same to you..."

I wondered why Mrs. Schlott couldn't take her son on his first day of school. She must have sensed my hesitation. "You can just point him in the right direction. He's a very sweet boy."

How bad could he be at six years old? Besides, I wasn't going to say no to a man with a gun.

"Yeah sure. I leave around eight."

"Perfect. He'll be here," said Mrs. Schlott, relieved.

The next Tuesday, the first day of school, Nicholas was waiting for me in front of our house, right on time, wearing a canvas backpack that reached from his shoulders to the seat of his pants. Of course he had grown, his hair had turned light brown and he still had the gentle smile.

"You all set, Nicholas?"

"Niki. They call me Niki now."

"Oh yeah, right, sorry. Niki it is."

He didn't seem pleased. We walked down the street and turned onto the train tracks. It puzzled me that after spending so much time naming the boy, and giving him a good name, that his parents would cut it up in such a way.

"So are you looking forward to school?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Not having a brother or a sister I didn't have a lot of experience talking to young kids and it wasn't as if I could ask him what his favourite subject

was or what he wanted to be when he grew up. Niki stopped to stare at an abandoned factory.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's an old factory. They used to make hats?"

"What kind of hats?"

"Fedora's I think."

The hat factory was the only abandoned factory along the line. On both sides grey smoke billowed from the smokestacks, trucks were lined up at loading docks, and the ground vibrated to the thrum of machinery. Everything interested Niki and he stopped to gaze at every warehouse or freight car.

"We're not going to make it to school in time," I said.

Niki nodded and picked up the pace. "Do you like it here?"

"Yeah, it's all right. Do you think you'll like it here?"

"Yeah, it's interesting. I just don't know how long I'm going to be here."

What a surprising thing to say. He seemed aware of where he had been and how fluid was the ground under him. He was a serious boy who knew a lot more than what he was letting on. We continued down the incline from the railway line and entered the Hochelaga Farmers Market.

"Wow," exclaimed Niki, his eyes bulging open.

Morning was the busiest time of the day for the market. First thing the trucks rolled from the farms in Franklin Centre, Ormstown, the Eastern Townships, and Joliette with potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and turnips. Freight cars were unloaded and crates were stacked high with fruits of all colours. A cacophony of voices called out the prices for the day and orders, "Deux cents

livres de pomme de terre rouge!" "Je t'donne cinq!" "Allons-y, vite!" Niki walked slowly, his eyes scanning over every detail taking it all in. He stopped at a vendor who had several varieties of apples spread out on the wooden counter. The vendor stopped what he was doing and regarded the boy.

"Ah mon ami, would you like one?"

Niki nodded.

The vendor came around the counter to Niki. "You like apples, oui? Which one would you like?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't have the change for that."

"Non, it's okay. First day of school for him, yes? Bien sûr, a very special day for you." The vendor picked out a red Gala and gave it to Niki. "This for your special day," he said then glancing up at me with a wink.

I thanked him and paused for a moment to look back the long line of fruit and vegetable stalls. I had been walking through this market on my way to school for six years and I had never seen it like I had on this morning.

Niki held that apple in his hand like it was a diamond. I managed to get him through the rest of the market and we set out across Hochelaga Street or at least I did. When I got to the other side Niki was not with me. He was standing on the median looking down the street to the west. This was not going well. My first day babysitting this kid and I was close to getting him killed. Dodging cars I ran back to him, grabbed his hand, and waited for the traffic to pass.

"What's over there?" asked Niki pointing to the tall buildings in the distance to the west.

"That's the city. Downtown. Now you've got to be careful. You can't be standing in the middle of the road like this."

"But I have the apple."

I had no idea what that meant and I wasn't going to ask. I had to get him to school. We crossed the street – together – and walked another block to the entrance of the elementary school. As he walked to the front door he turned to me and waved. Phew, I thought. Got through that one.

Maisonneuve High School was across the street and it was just as nondescript as the elementary school. It seemed to me that the architects who design schools must be the same ones who design prisons. Except for location, they're essentially the same. For the next two years I have work to do here with a full load of ten subjects. I had to up my grades, big time, if I was going to have any chance of getting into McGill. And there was Nora, the two of us holding the house together. I had started a job at the city library to bring some extra cash and learned to cook something more than a boiled egg. I was thinking about all those things sitting at my desk in Mr. Duff's history class as he rambled on about the rise and fall of the Third Reich (when is that war ever going to end?), staring out the window watching the leaves slowly turn when I saw a door open at the elementary school and Niki walked out, backpack strapped to his back, and headed towards Hochelaga.

"What!" I blurted and ran for the door.

Mr. Duff stood, dumfounded. "Something about Goering upset you?"

I ignored him, took the stairs two at time, burst through the doors and ran down the sidewalk. Niki was ten meters from the street. I shouted his name but he kept walking. I ran across the street almost getting hit by a car and got to the Niki just as the light turned red.

I caught my breath. "Where are you going, Niki?"

"Home."

"What? You can't go home now."

"But the bell rang."

"That's for recess. Didn't your mother tell you about recess and lunch and all that stuff?" He shook his head. I thought he might cry. "It's okay, it's okay. Let me check something." All kids have school schedules. Life would fall apart without them. I pulled one out of his backpack and showed it to him. "You see here. Recess. It's for playin'…with your friends." That seemed to make things better for the moment. I bent down and looked at him straight. "It's okay, Niki. Everything takes a little time. You'll figure it out."

I walked him back to his school and told him to wait for me when school was let out. By the time I got back to the classroom, the lecture was over and Mr. Duff was working at his desk. "What was that all about?" I apologized and said it had nothing to do with the lecture. "You never told me you had a brother."

"I don't. He's a new kid on our street. I was supposed to point him in the right direction. I haven't been doing well."

"Parents?"

"He has them. They're just helpless."

"That's harsh."

"Maybe. They adopted the kid. A ready-made kid. Now they have no idea what to do with him."

"So you're already his surrogate brother?"

"Please don't say that."

"All right. So we have to talk about you. What are your plans for this year?"

Mr. Duff taught history, literature and some philosophy and he was a good teacher. I liked him but I wasn't going to tell him about what was happening at home.

"Plans? I'm in grade ten. What plans am I supposed to have?"

"You did all right last year. You picked up your grades. You've got to do better if you want to get into university."

I promised him I would study hard, helped by Nora cracking the whip over me. Maybe Duff knew about my father leaving and was trying to be a surrogate in his own way. But I wasn't going to tell him anything. I didn't want sympathy. I barely had the words to shape what had happened to Henry. How could I explain what was happening to me?

Niki and I walked home that day and continued going to school together for the whole semester. As the weeks rolled by I became more comfortable with him, seeing him less as a kid to be babysat and more like a friend. On those days that he was off sick, I actually missed him and the walk was less interesting. He was intensely curious about everything and I naively thought that all kids were like that. But Niki was different.

By the first week of December the Hochelaga Market was closed down for the winter. The stalls were gone along with the farmers and the apples. Niki stopped in the middle of the canopied mall: "Where did everybody go?"

His voice was plaintive, his brow furrowed. It looked like he felt abandoned, all this entertainment taken away for no reason. I told him that winter was coming and the growing season was over.

"Does that mean we won't eat until next year?"

I had to laugh then assured him he would not starve and that next spring the market would open again. He seemed satisfied with that but he walked

through the empty marketplace very slowly, contemplating every spot where a stall once stood.

One day I walked Niki to his home and went in for a glass of water. Mrs. Schlott was visiting a neighbor across the street. It was the first time I had been in their house and while it was clean and comfortable, the walls were bare like a blank page, almost no marks or clues to say anything about the Schlotts. And not a book in sight.

"Niki, do you have any other books other than your school books?"

"What kind of books?"

"You know, story books."

"I have this," he said, taking out a copy of See Dick and Jane Run from his satchel.

"That's it?"

"Yeah and it's not very good."

"That happens sometimes."

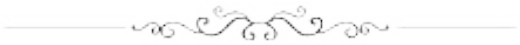
I had a shift at the library the next day and with Mrs. Schlott's reluctant permission I took Niki with me. Again, it was the slow painful walk. He stopped at every shop window, wanting to know why the mannequins had no heads. When we finally got to the library I was ten minutes late and had to get busy stacking. I turned to Niki: "You see that nice lady over there behind the check-out counter? You go to her. She'll get you what you need."

A couple of hours later I found Niki in the children's reading room sitting at a table surrounded by stacks of books. He was reading furiously, finishing one book and picking out the next. The librarian told me the boy was hungry for books and would give him a few to take home with him: "He told me

there are no books at his home. We've got to make sure he has lots to read or we might lose him."

I sat down at the table across from Niki. "You can take these books home with you if you like. We'll come here every week. Is that okay?"

I might as well have told him that it was Christmas morning. Once a week I would take him to the library and each time he would carry home a stack of books. By the spring he had gone through every book in the children's section. By the end of that summer he disappeared into the young adult section.



Nora had been promoted at D-M Publishing and was now an assistant editor. I was working full time that summer at the library but it was Nora who held things together. In addition to her job at D-M, she also wrote book reviews for newspapers, read manuscripts. She also had a dream of establishing an independent book publishing house devoted to Canadian authors but financing such things was proving to be difficult. Nobody with any investment capital were willing to risk a dime on such a venture, especially one headed by a woman. She brought home so many books I had to build more shelves in the hallway which was getting narrower by the week. Most of the books were American and, as Mr. Duff said, mostly bad.

In my spare time I tried to take a photograph that was properly exposed, for once, and maybe in focus, for once, if I was lucky or if I had any talent. It was on one of those hot humid days in the summer of '54 when I was again

trying to find inspiration with my camera when the typing stopped in the study. Nora came out the back door in a plume cigarette smoke, her floral dress swaying to her quick stride. She parked herself on the lawn chair in front of me. “We have to talk.”

“We’ve had that talk.”

“No, not that one. This one.” She placed what looked to be a legal document in front of me. Citation?

“What, you’re suing me?”

“No silly!”She opened the document. “This is your father’s citation, for bravery.”

“But I know this story.”

“No, you don’t. You heard a story, once. This is the real story. And when you’re finished reading it, I’m taking you for a drive.” She went back into the house to her typing and I read the citation.

In classic military jargon the citation described in detail the story Henry had told that night several years ago in Sonny’s backyard But when the narrative came to the moment when the Stuka turned for a second attack the story took a very different turn.. As it was described, Henry “climbed the slope from the river alone and fired multiple rounds at the enemy aircraft, bringing it down with a perfect shot to the underside gas tank…” Alone? The citation continued: “The Lieutenant’s actions saved the lives of many of the men in his platoon.” It went on to recognize that two soldiers of the platoon were killed but were it not for Henry it could have been much worse. My mind was spinning when I went to Nora’s study. “I don’t get it. Why did father tell such a different version.”

“Like I said. We’re going for a drive.”

Nora drove our Ford Fairlane south towards the St. Lawrence then turned west.

"I heard the story he told that night," said Nora. "He said he didn't deserve the medal. Remember? He hocked it. The two soldiers who were killed were his best friends: Fitzgerald and Bergerman. They went to boot camp together then overseas with the regiment. Bergerman was Jewish. He wanted to get to Berlin first and kill Hitler himself with his bare hands. It's because of them, seeing them dead that hit him hard."

"But he must have seen a lot of dead soldiers. It was Italy."

"How do you know that?

"In one of the books you brought home, Canada At War."

"I can't explain how this trauma works, son. It may be cumulative. I don't know. But your father felt guilty for not saving those two men. His version of the attack was his way of saying he didn't deserve the medal."

We drove into the suburb of Verdun and continued on the river road with the St. Lawrence alongside. The river narrowed, churning into rapids and whitecaps. It roared but it also was a relief from humidity with the cool breeze coming from the river.

"And by the way, I have something for you," she said taking a red velvet-covered box from her purse. Inside was the Victoria Cross and embossed on the underside of the lid was my father's name and "For Valour". Hanging from a crimson ribbon was a bronze cross pattée superimposed with the Crown and Lion insignia. "With my first pay cheque I went to the pawnshop and bought it back. Funny thing is the guy told me he would never have sold it. He said the vets sometimes have a change of heart. He remembered Henry and he knew he was having a difficult time."

"You want me to have this?"

"Yes, you should have it." She thought for a few moments while glancing down to the blue whirlpool of the river. "Think about all the vets on Rainbow Street. Sonny Balfour is an alcoholic. So is Bill Chesterton. Luc Dubois hasn't held a job since he came home. The Prowses' can barely keep their marriage together and I haven't seen Seymour Glass come out of his house in five years. The only normal one seems to be Mr. Schlott and you don't hear a peep out of him."

"You've got that right. I've been escorting his son to school for a year and he's barely uttered a word to me."

We turned onto a tree-lined estate road. To the right, a large sign: Douglas Psychiatric Hospital

"My father is insane now!?"

"No, son. Your father has what's called neurasthenia. It's brought on by a sudden trauma or shock. It leads to depression, lethargy, insomnia. But it doesn't always manifest itself immediately after the event. It can sometimes take months before something happens to trigger the memory."

"The trains?"

"Right, the trains."

We continued along the treed driveway that twisted around the main building. The grounds around the hospital were large and verdant.

"So what are they doing to treat him?"

"His psychiatrist is Dr. Lacroix. Normally, he's told me, they use electric shocks and drug medications but he doesn't want to do that. Neither does Henry. So it's talk therapy and rest.

"How long has he been here?"

"A couple of months. I wanted to be sure he'd settle in before telling you."

She stopped the car and pointed to a bench where Henry was sitting alone amidst a large grassy area shrouded with maple trees.

Nora turned to me. "I still love your father. Whatever illness he may have is not his fault. He asked to see you. Get rid of your anger and go talk with him. It's important."

I walked across the grass towards my father. In the distance I heard the churning waters of the rapids.

"Hello father."

Henry stood up and looked directly at me. "Hello, son."

He shook my hand. He had lost a lot of weight, his complexion was pale, his hair had thinned and turned grey, his eyes were alert, steady and clear. He was very much present and I didn't think he would shatter into pieces. We sat together on the bench.

"It's good to see you, son. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I'm graduating next year and I'm planning to go to McGill. I want to go into law." I didn't tell him he was the reason I was doing that.

"That's good. Your mother says she's an editor now. So you're both doing well."

"When you leave here are you coming home?"

He seemed surprised by my question. He sighed deeply. "I don't think so, son."

"Why not? We can take care of you."

Henry smiled. "I'm sure you can. But my problem is something you and your mother can't cure. I won't burden you with it."

At that point my anger took over. "I'm tired of this bullshit! We can't talk about this and we can't talk about that. What the hell can we talk about? Or do we just sit here and watch the grass grow. What am I doing here?"

Henry looked at me sternly. "Your mother said you might be angry. You shouldn't be."

"I'm trying to understand."

"Come walk with me."

We strolled towards the far end of the grounds. I looked back at the parking lot and saw that Nora had left. Henry remained quiet for a bit, then: "The war is still going on in my head. I have got to return to the Front. I complain to myself because it hasn't stopped yet. I'm worried because I can't find my active-service kit. I'm worried because I've forgotten how to be an officer. Can you believe that? I've got you and your mother and freedom in this country and all I can think about is war. Sometimes I cry and say, 'It's no good. I can't do it.' The war has made me a foot soldier for the rest of my life."

This was the mystic sorrow I had seen in the other vets on Rainbow Street. It was in his eyes, in his face, in his body.

"I don't think I've slept since I came back. That's one of the reasons I'm here. I had myself committed."

He told me that after he left us he went to the countryside, to the Ormstown region where he worked on farms as a hired hand. It was wide open country spaces, almost prairie, and he didn't have to talk to people except the farmers who hired him. He came back to the city during the winter, got some odd jobs but mostly stayed in his room, waiting. When spring came, he went back down to Ormstown.

"I can't get through a day without crying. I can't get through a day without…without the image of Fitzgerald and Bergerman flooding into my brain. I can't stop it and I can't explain it."

"But you weren't responsible for those men dying."

"I know that." Henry's demeanor suddenly changed. His eyes went very sad. He stopped at a bench and sat leaning forward, his long fingers gripping his forehead then running them through his hair. "It creeps in like a worm, relentless and slow and as slow as it comes, I can't stop it."

His chest began to quiver and he cried. I put my arm around his shoulders and held him. It was the first time I had touched him in years. His body felt light and tender to the touch and I thought if I squeezed too tight he really might shatter. I felt helpless, maybe as helpless as he felt. We sat there for several minutes, quiet and alone under the rustling leaves and the dazzled pigeons like rings of scattered paper fluttered above the tree canopy taking the rays of sunlight on their wings.

I didn't know my father all that well. I was three when he went to overseas and when he came back it took me a while to figure out who he was. When you're a kid routine is important and every person in your life plays an assigned role. Then suddenly a new actor arrives, one who is supposed to be your father but who doesn't act like one. By the time I did get used to him being a father the cracks had started to appear. Henry retreated into his world and I lost my chance to know him better. Nora had that chance long before I arrived. "He was a beautiful man. Tall, big toothy smile and smart as a whip." They had met at Loyola College. Henry had just graduated with a degree in business administration. Nora would graduate in fine arts the following year. "They were celebrating graduation in the faculty lounge. I was walking with a friend across campus and we could see the party going

on through the windows. We figured what the hell and we walked in. I saw him right away. Unlike all the other men in those days who had moustaches, Henry was clean shaven. His skin was dark and his eyes were riveting. We danced together all night and that was it. A year later we were married."

It was 1934 and the Depression was at its worst but Henry was persistent and with his degree had landed a job at Simpson's as the manager of the purchasing department. Depression or not, people still needed clothes. "It was all perfect," said Nora. "We got a new apartment and we were getting by. We had you in '37. The world was at our feet. Then the world went to war and that was the end of that."

Nora was waiting for me in the parking lot. She lit a cigarette, put the car in gear as the smoke unraveled out the window. We left the hospital grounds and turned onto the river road. I rolled down the window and let the breeze cool my face. I wasn't old enough yet to barge into some government ministry office or stand in court to plead a case but one day I would. Seeing what the military had done to my father, and to thousands of other men and women, I determined what my future would be. Nora had gone to the military brass at the regiment demanding assistance for the care and treatment of her decorated husband. They denied her several times, claiming that my father's "mental illness" was not attributable to his war experience but rather to when the illness arose which was several months after the war. "We gave you a house. What more do you want?" they said.

Before heading home Nora said she wanted to drop by the office to pick up a manuscript. D-M was on the sixth floor of a commercial building on Ste. Catherine Street in downtown Montréal. "Come in with me. You need a break from thinking," said Nora and she was right.

We stepped off the elevator and walked down the corridor to the

doors of the D-M office. There were display cases showing the books they published. The office was a modest space with several desks and of course books everywhere. A cloud of grey cigarette haze hung over the room. Although it was Saturday there were two people at work, one man typing, and a woman drawing graphics. Nora introduced me to them: Tyler Innis and Julia Browne. They were friendly enough, but very pre-occupied and they went back to their work. Nora went over to her desk near the back of the office and searched through the drawers.

"You know all the writers on-display out front are Americans, right."

Of course I knew. I'd read most of them because Nora brought review copies home.

"No Canadian writers. That's what we are going to change," she said glancing over to Tyler and Julia. "That's why we're working weekends. We're setting up a new publishing company which will publish only Canadian writers – poetry, prose, non-fiction, children's books, whatever. But they have to be good."

"When?"

"Soon enough, I hope.. Tyler is working on the financing and Julia is hunting for manuscripts. We have to have books to publish first, good books. These manuscripts here," she said turning to a stack of manuscripts on the floor, "They're submissions from Canadian writers. We've got to read them and somehow find a diamond in the rough. We have some potential investors committed to helping us get started and we have bookstores on-board."

Nora pulled one of the manuscripts from the pile and tossed it on the desk. "So you want to do some reading?"

"Me? I don't know what's bad or good."

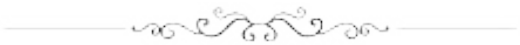
"Yes you do. You just finished Middlemarch. I'm sure you can handle these," tossing another manuscript on the desk.

Middlemarch. That book almost killed me. A great story, told with more words than was really necessary. Brevity was not George Eliot's forte.

"We'll pay you for your struggle."

"No," I said. "I want to do this. I'm in."

Nora gave me three manuscripts to read and after talking with Tyler and Julia we headed home.



As soon as we turned the corner onto Rainbow Street we knew something was up. Mrs. Schlott was in front of our house talking with a couple of neighbours. When Nora pulled into the driveway, Mrs. Schlott came running to me as I stepped out of the car.

"Do you know where Niki is?" she said pleadingly. Nora told her we had been away all day and I had no idea. "He left on his bike a few hours ago and he hasn't come home. I've looked everywhere."

Niki had been given a bicycle and over the summer he had travelled the neighbourhood including the harbour and dockyards. One day I had seen him in the farmers market. He often waved at me as he went by with a, "See y'a later." Getting away from his house and exploring was a full time job.

"My husband is at work and I can't walk much more," said Mrs. Schlott now almost in tears.

Nora calmed her down. She told Mrs. Schlott to wait at her home in case Niki showed up. Nora waved me back into the car and we drove off.

"Any ideas?" she asked.

I remembered the first day of school last year when he stopped in the middle of the street and stared at downtown. "Go down to Hochelaga and turn right. And drive slow." Nora gave me her squint-eye. "Just a hunch," I said.

The afternoon was tapering towards its long yellow end, the humid air was still. People lounged on their balconies, sipping beer, shouting out for dinner. The stores were closing, their windows blackened by the fading light. There was plenty here for Nicholas to get lost in and hopefully it would slow him down.

Nora glanced at me: "You like him, don't you."

"He's all right. We've gotten to know each other pretty good. He doesn't get much stimulation at home though."

I told Nora about there being no books in the Schlott's house or pictures.

"I know," she said. "It's like a funeral parlour in there."

The streets rolled by as we drove directly into the harsh glare of the setting sun cutting through the dusty haze. The buildings got bigger as we approached the downtown core and soon we were at St. Hubert Street. Niki had a three hour head start and there was no telling how far he had made it or even if he had stayed on Hochelaga. Then there he was, standing in front of a storefront with a police officer – not his father – staring down at him. Niki was gazing through the store window at an array of black and white TV screens all broadcasting a football game. Nora stopped the car. "This is going to be interesting," she said.

The police officer turned to us and smiled. That was a relief. At least Niki hadn't broken any laws, yet.

"Bonjour, Madam. Is this your boy?"

Nora was about to answer but Niki chimed in first. "He's my brother. And I wasn't losted."

Brother? Oh boy, Nora was right.

"Eh bon. It's been good to meet you, mon ami. Next time tell your mother where you're going. Salut, Madame."

"I wasn't losted," said Niki quite indignant.

The officer chuckled, tipped his hat and continued on his beat. We loaded the bicycle into the trunk, Niki into the back seat, then we headed back east.

Niki was looking out the window as we passed the stores. "Ladies around here sure like dresses a lot."

He was right. Every second store was a dress shop.

"Window shopping, were you?" said Nora.

"No. I didn't want to buy a window." Great, the boy was already a literalist. "And radios. There's lot's of radios."

It seemed that most of them didn't work very well if all the atelier des réparations were any indication. I turned to Niki. "You know I'm not really your brother."

"I know that. Why does everybody think I'm stupid? I said that so the policeman would let me come with you."

"Quick thinking," said Nora. "He probably wouldn't have handed you over otherwise."

It was quick thinking but did he really see me in that way?

Nora looked at Niki through the rear-view mirror: "Do other people say you're stupid?"

"Yeah," he said staring out the window.

"Who?"

"Mom and dad mostly."

"What else do they tell you?"

"Every time I'm bad, which is just about always, Mom tells me they're gonna send me back."

Nora was incredulous. She hit the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. "What?! The agency?"

"No," he said. "The orphanage. Weredale House I think."

Nora got out from behind the wheel and sat with Niki in the back seat.

"Do you remember anything about that time?" she asked.

He gazed off into the darkening sky. "No, not really." Then he looked at her. "Do you?"

Nora looked puzzled then realized what he was asking. "No, I don't suppose I do." She leaned closer to his face to catch his eyes. "Listen Niki, don't let anyone say that to you again. No one is going to take you back there. Understand? And if ever you think you are, you come and see me. Okay?"

Niki nodded. Nora turned to the car door but stopped. "Do you like your name?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's a name for a cat."

"You got that right. So would mind if we called you Nicholas? It is your real name, isn't it.?"

"Yeah, I like it."

"It's settled then. Nicholas it is."

That was fine with me because I hated the name Niki, too. Mrs. Schlott was waiting for us in front of their house. She took Nicholas out of the back seat and the bike from the trunk, said not a word to us, went into the house and slammed the front door.

"What do you think is going on in there?" I asked Nora.

"Two people who should have never been allowed to take in a child."

We didn't see Nicholas for two weeks. He didn't come with me to the library and I didn't see him out on his bicycle. The only thing I knew for certain was that for the rest of his life Nicholas would literally be a flight risk. But on the first day of the new school year he was waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of our house.

"Good to see you, Nicholas. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I had lots of time to read."

We took our usual route along the tracks and passed through the farmers market. Over the past summer Nicholas had befriended one of the farmers. His name was Enzo and he sold potatoes, tomatoes and apples grown on his farm in Ormstown. Nicholas did light work around Enzo's stall. "I do not work him hard. He folds paper bags." But it was more than that. Enzo taught Nicholas about the rhythms of the growing season and the secret to growing Italian tomatoes. "Water. Lots and lots'a water."

Nora continued working at D-M, the idea of setting up a publishing company with Julia and Tyler fading fast. There was no investment money coming in. The manuscripts Nora had given me to read were not very good, even with the wilderness and the snow and the horses. Finding the book Nora was looking for would not be easy. We all knew they were out there. Mr. Duff had introduced us to Canadian literature in class and assigned reading: Barometer Rising and Two Solitudes by MacLennan, The Tin Flute

by Gabrielle Roy. "These books were published outside of Canada and only printed and distributed here by branch offices."

One of my classmates chimed in: "My father read a Canadian novel and he said it was lousy."

"So what," said Duff now in full oratory. "The Americans publish thousands of novels every year. Do you think they are all good? So do the Brits. Are they all great books?" He stopped pacing and looked at us. "No, they are not. Maybe only the French write great books. The list is long of classic French literature. It is also long on overly long, tedious, melodramatic drivel. My point is, so should we. We should publish both bad and good novels here because I don't think the distinction exists. Readers decide. And in Canada we have a ton of readers, just like you."

One night that spring Nicholas stayed with us overnight. We had book shelves all through the house and Nicholas dove into them. It didn't matter that many of the books were beyond his age range. He seemed to relish the very idea of a book, the feel, the smell. Nora was in the living room reading some papers she had typed-up that day. Nicholas was on the floor reading a book from our library. He held the book in front of him with both hands, his head inclined over the pages, as if he were being drawn in by what he was reading. I finished washing the dishes and came into the living room to join them when I saw Nora put down her papers, lean forward and stare intently at Nicholas.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

Nicholas hoisted up my own bruised copy of The Jungle Book. Nora took the book, opened it and felt along the dry cracked spine. She rubbed the paper with her fingers.

"What are you doing, mother? Looking for blood."

"Not quite." She handed the book back to Nicholas. "Thank you, Nicholas." Nora threw the pages she had typed into the kitchen garbage, went to her study, closed the door and typed all evening. The next morning I was making coffee, Nicholas was slurping Cheerios. Nora burst out of the study, stuffing papers into her briefcase while perfectly attired, fresh as a daisy. She kissed me on the cheek then leaned to Nicholas and kissed him, too. "Thank you, you beautiful boy," and she set on out the door. It was no use calling after her.

"Is she always in a hurry?" asked Nicholas.

"Yeah, pretty much."

I visited Henry several times that winter. He never seemed to be getting any better. We walked the grounds of the hospital, often in silence. A few times I tried to convince him that being in this place was not making him better, that when you live with sick people you get sick just like them.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But none of these people ask me any questions and that's what I want more than anything else. No more questions."

"I'm not asking," I said. "We want you to come home. I promise we will take care of you."

"No, son. That's never going to happen." He paused, his dark eyes locking on me like a missile. "I'll remind you that I know I am having a nervous breakdown, but I haven't lost my mind, I can still think and I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. Do you understand?"

He was telling me to back off. And so I did.

After I left Henry that day I walked along shoreline of river. The winter had been a harsh one and the spring run-off churned the Lachine Rapids into a seething, frothing torrent. I heard the roar so loud as to drown out the sound of all else.

During the night when Nora had disappeared into her study, she rewrote the business plan for a Canadian book publishing company. They would publish children's books but of high quality with spines that wouldn't crack under the physical pounding of a kid. "And with vibrant colours that don't rub out on your fingers," she said. "But we've still got to find the writers." She turned to walk away in another twirl of smoke but changed her mind. "And I'm tired of stories about animals. Every kid's story is about an animal. Enough with the animals!" She needed a lot of money to start up the company, she still didn't have any writers and she certainly did not have a story without animals.

Nicholas and I continued to walk together during my final year of high school and we had developed a rapport that was uniquely ours. On those days that Nicholas took off sick from school I missed him and the walk was that much more uninteresting. Talking to him and answering his endless questions somehow relieved my own sense dread which arrived late one afternoon.

We had turned the corner from the railway tracks onto Rainbow Street and I saw the police car parked in front of our house. I forgot about Nicholas and ran inside. Standing at the entrance to the living room was a police officer and next to him Dr. Lacroix, Henry's psychiatrist. Nora was sitting on the couch staring at a pile of neatly folded clothes atop a brown paper bag. I knew whose clothes they were. I had met Dr. Lacroix at the hospital and he had told us that my father was doing fine and could leave any time he wished. And so he did yesterday afternoon when, as the police officer explained it, Henry had gone to the shoreline at the Lachine Rapids, undressed, laid his clothes neatly on the ground and walked into the rapids. A man walking by saw Henry go into the water and disappear under the seething current. He ran along the shore hoping Henry would come out but he didn't. The

policeman said his body might wash up but it was possible it could float downriver.

"To the ocean?" I asked.

The officer lowered his head. Dr. Lacroix said that they had searched Henry's room but had not found a note.

"Tell me something Dr. Lacroix," said Nora. "Do you feel the same way a surgeon does when they lose a patient on the operating table?"

"Nora, I worked with Henry more than any other patient I have ever had. We did talk therapy every day. We were going to try drug medication but that would have rendered him a vegetable. We know what the war did to him and other men but we don't know how the mechanism works. I wish we did."

"Then why did you let him wander around like that?"

"The Douglas is not a prison. Henry was a self-committal. He was free to leave anytime he wanted."

"But he was suicidal."

"Every patient I have is suicidal," said Dr.Lacroix his voice rising. "And let me tell you, I feel worse than a surgeon does right now. A surgeon doesn't necessarily know the patient on the operating table but I know my patients intimately well and when something like this happens, it hurts. Deeply. I'm very sorry."

I thought Dr. Lacroix was going to cry but his professional posture kicked in and he quietly left with the officer. I realized only then that Nicholas was there the whole time and had heard everything.

"I can…"

"No, Nicholas!" I barked. "Not now. Go home!"

Quietly he left and I sat beside Nora who was frozen in place.

"He's only eight," she said. "He can't be expected to understand."

"He understands more than you think. But I don't care about him right now."

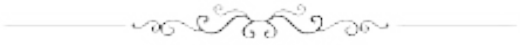
Nora took a shirt from the pile and put it up her nose. "I remember his smell when I first danced with him. It's like yesterday." She put the shirt back on the pile and lit a cigarette. "I suppose you're waiting for me to weep. I'm all cried out, son. Maybe it's your turn."

"Yeah. Maybe."

After a police search that lasted three weeks, scouring both shorelines all the way to Québec City, Henry's body was never found. I suppose it spared us any emotional upheaval that would've come with a funeral. But it also denied to us the chance to bestow a grace upon his life, to honour a man who gave his life for his country. I know he didn't die in battle. He died in the skirmish that followed. But die in battle he did. I often imagine what happened to his body, whether it was taken up by the strong currents of the St.Lawrence, carried out to the gulf and on to the Atlantic Ocean. Or did he do as Viriginia Woolf had done by putting rocks in his pockets and sinking to the bottom. No, I don't think he did that. I don't think he wanted his body found. As for a note, Henry had been telling us all along, for almost a decade, of his anguish in every sleepless night. What more could be written? In the control he had taken over his death Henry was repeating what he had done on the banks of the Moro River in Italy in 1944; he was thinking about the lives of others and in sparing us the funeral and the note, so often the mark of a suicide, he was sparing us any further angst, telling us to grieve no more and to get on with it.

Later that night I went out to our backyard. It was a full moon and the

yard was bright as day. I smelled the sweet scent of Nora's roses. I grabbed my knees and put my head down, sucking up air, sick and dizzy, and then I screamed for the entire world to hear.



I went to see Nicholas the next day. Mrs. Schlott answered the door and said without my asking, "He's at the market."

He would likely be at Enzo's stall and I was about to thank her when she snapped back at me: "Why are you giving him so many books? Every week he brings in more books. There's no more space in his room."

I could not comprehend what I was hearing. Too many books? What did that mean? I didn't think my suggesting they build could more shelves was going to be very well received. "What would you like me to do, Mrs. Schlott?"

"Just don't give him anymore damn books. Simple," she said closing the door.

What kind of regime was Nicholas living under? I walked over to Hochelga Market and found Nicholas behind Enzo's stall sitting on a potato crate reading a book. Enzo came up behind me. "He's'a quiet today. I don't make him work."

Enzo never really made him work. He'd have Nicholas pack up one pound bags of tomatoes, things like that, but never lifting the heavy crates. He had Nicholas around for the company. "He tell me about your father. I'm very sorry. He helped to liberate our country. Here, take these to your Mama," he said handing me a large paper bag. "Italian tomatoes. Very sweet."

"Thank you, Enzo."

I quietly walked over to Nicholas and sat beside him. "I'm sorry I shouted at you yesterday. I was very upset. It wasn't your fault."

"I know." He closed the book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. "I'm really sorry about your dad."

"Do you understand how he died?"

"Yes. I knew he was very sad."

I looked at him, puzzled. "How did you know that?"

"We talked a few times."

"You what? How could you have met him?"

"In the alley. He walked by at night."

So there it was: all the time that we wondered where he was, in his own way he had come home. "But what we're you doing there?"

"I don't sleep well. I get up in the night. I go to the backyard. I watch the stars and the moon."

"Your parents don't know this?"

"They don't know anything. I saw your dad a few times. One night I went to the fence and said hello to him."

"So in the middle of the night you walk up to a complete stranger and say Hi? Boy, you got to learn some street smarts."

"But he wasn't a stranger to me."

"What did you talk about?"

"All kinds of stuff. School. The trees. Birds. He liked birds. Not many around at night though. He talked about you a lot. He really loved you."

What is it about this kid that people want to talk to him? Maybe because he just listens. That's what kids do. They may not understand a word your saying but they will take it all in, process it then say something that utterly startles.

"So this kind'a means that we have something in common," said Nicholas. "We've both lost our fathers."

"But you have a father, Nicholas."

"Him? He's not my father."

In many ways Nicholas was right. You could see it already. There was no resemblance with either parent. They talked differently and unlike them Nicholas' eyes were penetrating. During one of our walks along the tracks he told me he liked it that way, that he could look at them and not see himself.

"You may feel that way but whatever you think of him you still have a father and he is very much alive."

Nicholas nodded slightly and said nothing.

"You do know that you have another mother and father."

He nodded.

"Do you remember them at all?"

"No. I don't think I saw them. Ever."

His eyes focused on a young woman unloading a crate of carrots from the back of a truck and carrying it to a stall. The crate looked to be heavy but for her it was a feather. She smiled at Nicholas as she passed by. When Nicholas had asked Nora if she remembered anything about her past, he intuitively understood memory. Just because his infancy was only a few years ago he was implying that his past was as distant as hers or mine and I can't recall my infancy except what Nora told me.

"I was walking with a woman," Nicholas said. "She wore a cloth coat. It had a fur collar. It was raining. There was a big, black bridge down the street. Cars were going over it. She took me to the doorway of a candy store. I looked at the candies in the window. They were white chocolate squares. The woman hugged me."

He paused for moment while looking at the young woman lugging another crate of carrots.

"Did she go into the store?"

"No. She said she had no money. Her coat was very wet. It smelled wet."

There was something else I had to tell him that was far more immediate. I had been accepted to McGill University to study political science and economics starting in September. Our morning and afternoon walks would be coming to an end. I told him we would still see each other but not every day.

"I knew that would happen," he said. "It's okay."

It was odd that he was reassuring me.

We didn't see much of each other that school year. I had a heavy course load of books to read, lectures, essays and I spent long hours in the library at night. I saw Nicholas a few times on weekends and on Christmas Eve when I gave him a book. It was my form of civil disobedience if only because I hoped it would irk Mrs. Schlott. I gave Nicholas a hardcover, illustrated edition of Gulliver's Travels. It was time for some satire in his life. When he unwrapped the book and looked at the cover his face lit up. I felt no guilt.

This was our first Christmas where Henry was truly gone, where we could no longer delude ourselves into thinking that he was still with us albeit wandering the streets at night. Nora dealt with it by working. Her study had become an office where she was attempting to put the pieces of her publishing

idea together. There was still no money but she solved the problem of an author by becoming the author herself. She was writing a children's book, Julia was doing the art work, and Tyler was trying to find the money. They were all still working at D-M so the days and nights were long.

It was on one of those crisp winter nights when I approached our home I saw a man standing on the sidewalk gazing at one of the houses across the street. He was not much more than a silhouette but it turned and walked towards me. "Hey, kid, how are you?" said the silhouette that became clearer under the yellow lights of the street lamp. I still did not recognize him.

He stopped and smiled at me. "Sorry to scare you. It's me, Sonny Balfour, from across the street."

Suddenly it clicked, "Mr.Balfour?"

"Hey, you're all grown up, kid. You can call me Sonny." He paused for a moment, his smile slowly fading. "I heard about your dad. I'm really sorry. I wanted to pay my respects to you and your mom."

"Yeah sure, she's inside."

The Balfours had left Rainbow Street a few years ago so my memories of Sonny were vague. I could tell he had lost weight, but his face was tanned and his eyes were clear. He gave the impression of being robust.

"I wanted to see the old place," he said looking longingly again to the house across the street. "They painted it. Beige. Humph. That ain't no colour in the rainbow. Listen, I know you might be angry about what your dad did. You shouldn't be."

"Did Nora speak to you?"

"No. My son did. He's pissed off at me, too. Tells me so all the time."

"But you made it. You're still here."

Sonny chuckled and shook his head. "Still here? Kid, I'm an alcoholic, okay. Sometimes I'm on the wagon, sometimes I'm off. But most of the time I'm a drunk. I'm sober now, have been for a couple of months. I don't know for how long. Betty left me, my two kids don't speak to me, so still being here isn't exactly grand."

"Do you understand why my father committed suicide?"

"Perfectly. I've thought of it a thousand times myself. Even how to do it. Clean. No mess."

"Henry got that one right."

"You bet. Your father was a perfectionist."

It was time to get in out of the cold. I also suspected that Sonny needed more than idle conversation. When Nora came out of her study, exhausted from another day of writing proposals and saw Sonny, her face lit up. She hugged him like he was her long-lost brother then insisted that it was time for a hot meal and a glass of wine.

"Coffee will be fine, Nora."

There was a pot of minestrone soup on the stove. I heated that up while Nora made sandwiches and coffee. Nora and Sonny sat at the kitchen table talking about old times and "where the hell has everybody gone?" I realized that if I was going to understand what happened to my father I needed to know about the experience of other veterans and that it was time to get it all down on paper. I got my notebook and as the night wore on, I wrote down what Sonny said. He ate heartily and lingered over his dinner, pondering over every question I asked.

"Things come back to you," he said. "Things you can't shake not matter how hard you try. A couple of years ago I was walking down this residential

street, you know, perfectly ordinary houses. Suddenly, for no reason, I was on Juno Beach and there were German snipers taking shots at me from the roofs. I hit the ground. People walking by thought I was nuts. Hard to argue that. I finally got out of there but I swear I heard gunfire. I see these things as clearly today as if they had just happened."

He paused, spooned some soup, and looked out the window into the white darkness. "I get lost a lot, on purpose. If it's on purpose how can I be lost, right? But I am…I wander, end up with no idea where I am…It's the only thing that keeps my brain quiet."

He went on to tell me that he'd been working as a farm hand in the Niagara Peninsula region, repairing fences, mucking out barn stalls, harvesting, picking fruit. "I like it. Fresh air, honest work, no concrete canyons that make me think a sniper might get me in his cross-hairs. It pays well, so long as I don't spend it on the wrong stuff...you know what I mean."

He was heading to work on a farm, Gordon Greene's ranch in Ormstown, southwest of here. Before the war Sonny was a chemist at the Monsanto plant next to the Lachine Canal. "They built it near water in case the place blew up and they needed to douse the joint." It was after the war that he'd started drinking. He'd gotten his old job back but he came in hung-over one too many mornings and was fired. "You don't want a drunk fiddling around with toxic chemicals."

Sonny stayed with us overnight but was up at dawn and gone. My world seemed to be populated by wanderers: my father, Nicholas, Sonny, and if we didn't live under the same roof I wouldn't see much of my mother either. There was a restlessness with everyone. This was supposed to be the staid and passive decade, undisturbed by the rumblings just below the surface. Nevertheless, I had several pages of notes and the beginnings of a notion.

In the spring of 1956 everything changed on Rainbow Street. It had been happening slowly over the past few years as many of the veterans and their families moved on. Some went west to new jobs in Toronto and Vancouver; some to divorce court; some to AA. The Schlott's were next. As Nicholas told it to me they were moving to a place he could not spell yet but it sounded something like "chat o da gay." Nicholas knew enough French to speculate, "It's something about a cat. A gay cat I think." We found it easily enough on a map: it was about forty miles south west of the island of Montréal on the shores of Lac.St. Louis. The town was Châteauguay.

It was a sunny morning in June when a moving crew was loading up a van with the Schlott's possessions. Nicholas came out the front door carrying a box of books that he loaded into the back of the van. "There's a couple more," he said.

"Well hurry it up," said Mrs. Schlott. "And I still don't know why you have to bring all these with you. It's not as if you're going to read them again," she said directing the line at me.

"Yes, mother," he said dismissively and went back into the house. He had perfected the fine art of ignoring parental jurisprudence while feigning obedience. I followed Nicholas into the empty house. There were a couple of boxes of books left but before we carried them out I wanted to give him my camera. My photography career had been a joke. I didn't have the eye for it, whatever that meant.

"I want you to have this, Nicholas. It's simple to use and therefore beyond me. I'm sure you'll have more success with it than I did. There's a couple of rolls of film in the case that'll get you started."

Nicholas took the camera out of the case and peered through the viewfinder likehe had six years ago. His face gleamed. "I'll send you my first picture, okay?"

"Yeah, we'll keep in touch."

"I won't forget you."

"Nor will I, Nicholas. Nor will I."

We carried the last of his books to the van. Mr. Schlott was piling things into the trunk of their car. It was the first time I had seen him out of uniform, his shirt sleeves rolled up showing his muscular biceps. I wondered what his wars stories were like? At six feet tall he would have been an imposing figure on a battlefield, much as Nicholas must have seen him looking up at this mountain of a father.

The tailgate of the van closed, the engine started in a billow of smoke. Nicholas and I shook hands.

"C'mon Niki, we've got to go," shouted Mrs.Schlott from the front seat of their car.

At that moment Nora came running along the sidewalk and hustled Nicholas behind the van, out of sight from his parents. "You remember what I said, Nicholas. You know where to reach us if you need anything, anything at all."

Nicholas nodded. "Thank you. And thanks for the books."

"Niki!" shouted his mother.

He rolled his eyes. That damn name again.

"I'll see you again," he said with a surety that left little doubt.

He climbed into the back seat of the car and they drove off. I watched them go up Rainbow Street, turn the corner, and they were gone. In the space of two years a boy ten years my junior had become my best friend and in spite of the promises made a wave of melancholy came over me: I would never see him again. It was going to be a hot, slow day.

Rainbow Street had changed, too. It was no longer Rainbow Street. With all the departing came an end to the colours, all of them. New owners wanted their own changes and so Rainbow Street became St.Clément Street once again in monotones of grey and white. Our house would be the last holdout but I overheard the wife of the family that purchased it whisper to her husband, "That blue has got to go." In a few days Nora and I would be leaving for an apartment in downtown Montréal, Nora to be closer to her work place and me to the university. It all made perfect sense except that Rainbow Street had been my home. We had that home because of Henry, my father, and it's because of that home - that Nora had just sold at ten times the original price - that I'll be able to continue my university studies and Nora will be able to finance the start-up of her publishing company. It's odd how a death can affect so much long after it has happened. The disappearance begins and in a certain way it never ends.

THE END

Rainbow Street

Richard Stanford

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RICHARD STANFORD

Rainbow Street

There are episodes in most men's lives in which their highest qualities can only cast a deferring shadow over the objects that fill their inward vision.
- George Eliot.

Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.